



KIDS CONFLICTS

SUPPORT KIT

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The Peaceful Parenting Approach to Kid's Conflicts

When children argue, it really tests a parent's patience. Yet the more equipped you are to respond constructively, rather than that dreaded sense of powerlessness that parents so often feel, the easier it will be to maintain your cool as you help them through it. It will also greatly help you to respond constructively if you can remember to shift your perspective from viewing your kids to be making life unnecessarily difficult, to instead seeing that they're experiencing a problem, one that's likely very big and definitely very real to them. Children much prefer to be having fun!

When two kids argue, they generally both feel frustrated, misunderstood, wrongly accused, rejected and often overwhelmed, to name but a few emotions. Additionally fearing their parent's rejection, blame or, worse still, punishment is not what they need.

What they do need is:

- help in developing the skills to manage those uncomfortable feelings that build up in their young bodies,
- the skills to express their feelings more appropriately,
- the listening skills to hear and acknowledge their sibling (or friend as the case may be)
- and support to brainstorm and solve their problems.

The problem solving approach is a truly respectful and constructive approach in helping arguing children by being an empathic mediator willing to support each person through their struggle rather than a referee who aims to evaluate, decide whose is in the right and whose is in the wrong and dictate a solution or "consequence".

This approach gives children the direct experience of **being treated with respect and empathy during conflicts**, and it's this experience more than any number of lectures on respect, that slowly but very surely teaches a child how to respond to siblings, friends and parents with greater respect and consideration during conflicts.

It's ok that children disagree, don't want to share, and feel big feelings.

Every upset between children is a learning opportunity. When adults repeatedly enforce their judgements and solutions on children's problems, children are deprived of the opportunity to even try and work it out. These solutions tend to be aimed at just making the conflict stop, "don't do that", "stop fighting", "give that back", "go to your room" without helping both children with their frustrations, underlying needs or confusion. It's normal for children to not want to share (especially when they're feeling frustrated and insecure) or to want what the other one has, it's normal for preschoolers to go through phases of hitting, pushing and biting and it's normal for children to be sensitive and get upset.

When we demand that the child does what they're being told to do rather than giving them the patient help they need to work it through, our child usually experiences that we're being intolerant of their feelings. When we tell the child who doesn't want to share that they should share, we ignore the feelings they have of being strongly attached to the item or perhaps their fears of giving it to the other child. When children pick up that their feelings are unacceptable to an adult, they can feel lonely, confused, blamed, guilty and perhaps even overwhelmed. Ironically, it's often the adult's lack of focus on accepting and sympathizing with the child's feelings that can make it more difficult for children to develop empathy and social skills.

But as a parent adopts the attitude that every conflict between two children is a problem that the children are having that they need help with, and that the squabble is not evidence that there is something wrong or bad about the child, then a parent can adopt a more caring and creative attitude in helping the children gain learning from the situation.

"Love accepts what is. Fear looks to blame because things are not going as they "should". Love looks for solutions as it accepts what is. Fear looks for blame, love seeks solutions." -
Becky A. Bailey PhD

Conflicts happen in most families on most days. Working with parents, I hear lots of stories of children fighting from the minor to the more extreme. Typical examples are sharing "the live toy"; when two or more children don't want another child to play with them; and when older children don't want younger ones tagging along. Let's explore a fairly typical example.

Angela has two children, four-year-old Bella and two-year-old Fin. Bella wants some of the blocks that Fin is playing with. Bella desperately wants those blocks to complete her little village, Angela intervenes telling Bella that she'll have to wait until Fin is finished, at which point Bella's frustration reaches overload to the point of a tantrum. Bella eventually calms down and offers Fin a deal of swapping toys. Fin happily swaps, both kids happy again ... that is for about ten minutes until Bella needs more blocks, again offers to swap, but Fin refuses. Bella is in tears again and shouts out "you're the meanest brother ever!" Now Fin dissolves into tears as well!

What doesn't help. It's tempting to tell Bella; "don't you speak like that about your brother!", but this will most likely fuel her resentment towards him and add conflict to conflict, either in the present or in future interactions. Most children interpret this intervention as "you're only caring about him" (sound familiar?). You could try and solve it for them "ok why don't you take turns playing with the blocks and I'll time you", you could think of a clever bribe or threat to encourage your toddler to share, but is this what you want to model? Or encourage them to forgive and forget, "come on say sorry to your brother", "share nicely with your sister".

Any of these options may end the conflict in the short term, but they probably won't help them resolve any frustrations that have built up. It won't resolve the inevitable misunderstandings, and it won't give them the opportunity to practice listening to each other, to own their problems or practice solving problems together.

What does help. One of the best ways of helping your child make their way back towards being calm and reasonable again is to express empathy; “hmm it looks like you’re really frustrated my girl, you really wanted those blocks didn’t you” Empathy heals and helps children feel acknowledged. To listen and reflect back what you hear shows that you’ve heard and understood their problem and invites them to share more. Receiving empathy naturally gives children the feeling of wanting to give empathy (when they're not overloaded with their own big feelings, which demand more immediate attention).

You may think, “surely I shouldn’t encourage upset feelings”, but actually the more you support them to get it all off their chest, the quicker they’ll get through it. If they don’t get it out, they WILL act it out. Letting the bad feelings out frees children to feel good again. Children gain strength from our acceptance of their feelings. Empathy is mostly expressed through tone of voice, eye contact and body language like a caring hand on the shoulder.

Most of the time you don’t have to fix their problems, you only need to show that you really care. Our children love to gain their own insights and solutions when we give them the space and encouragement through our patient listening, reflecting back and validating their feelings and wishes.

If this approach is new, here are **some guidelines** that may help:

1. Connect with both children with messages of support; “looks like you kids have a problem, can I help?” Intervening in this way can diffuse tensions from the beginning. It reassures each child that you’re not laying blame or taking sides, which you might have noticed, most children are very sensitive to!
2. If one child is in danger, physically intervene if necessary, protecting by blocking one child from hurting, hitting, biting, perhaps putting your body between the two, holding or restraining if necessary while staying as neutral, calm and non-threatening as possible.
3. When empathizing with the child who has been hurt, if possible keep the child who did the hurting close to you with messages of "I know you need me as well, stay with me while I care for whose very sad", this inclusion, rather than rejection, is a lovely way of inviting, without pressurizing, the child who did the hurting to join in with expressing care and/or remorse.
4. Express limits where necessary "I can't let you say those words to your sister" or "can you please express what you feel to your sister more respectfully".
5. If one or both children are particularly upset, just listen and let them get it all out until they’re ready to seek a solution, if the problem still exists at that point. Reasoning escalates upsets when a child is emotionally charged.
6. Facilitate them taking turns to give their side of the story and hearing each other. With pre-verbal children, you can express in words what you interpret they’re expressing, “John it looks like you pushed Maria because you didn’t want to share the truck, is that right?”
7. Reflect what you hear, re-framing where necessary. “I hate him, he NEVER shares, he’s mean!”; “you’re really upset because you really want those blocks.”

8. Encourage them to contribute ideas to solve the problem, then respect and restate all ideas as non-judgmentally as possible; “Bella you want Fin to swap blocks for cars and Fin you’re suggesting Bella go outside and play, hmm this is a tricky one. I reckon you kids can work it out. Are there some ideas you haven’t thought of?” Children who were unwilling to discuss options previously are often enabled to do so with the adult’s support.
9. Help them decide which idea they prefer, if any; and help them carry it out.
10. Reinforce the process when the problem is solved. “You both shared your feelings and ideas, you listened to each other, you found a solution. You kids worked together to listen to each other and seek a solution to your problem.”

When no solution can be found. For Bella and Fin, it reached the point where there wasn’t an easy solution – they were both upset. It’s hard for child and parent, but it’s understandable and they need to be allowed to be upset. Trust that your soothing messages are being received despite continued cries. Nice messages can be; “I’ll be with you while you wait Bella”, “Fin you’re upset that your sister is angry with you”, “I’m looking after you both and caring for all your feelings - what a good cry, you’re getting it all out”. Try to avoid rushing them out of their feelings, the more you resist, the more their hurt feelings will persist.

In such instances, the girl or boy may need to express a backlog of feelings that have caused them to be generally out of balance, the conflict may be just a catalyst, what they need is for mum or dad to share the moment with them and be their loving empathic rock of strength as they get it all out.

With the right kind of intervention, we can support children to develop the skills and the confidence to be constructive problem solvers for life!



Example scenario with script

Bella (4) wants some of the blocks that Finn (2) is playing with. Bella desperately wants those blocks to complete her little village. Mum hears voices getting louder and offers support.

CONNECT *"Looks like you kids have a problem, can I help?"*

PROTECT Mum moves nice and close to ensure neither child lashes out physically.

LISTEN

Mum: *"Hmm it looks like you're really frustrated my girl, you really wanted those blocks didn't you?" "Finn, you're very sad too. Did you get a fright?" "I'm here to help"*

- Use active listening to help them listen to one another, reflecting back what you hear.

Mum: *"Bella it looks like you really wanted the blocks, is that right?"*

Bella: *"Yes and Finn wouldn't give them. I hate him, he NEVER shares, he's mean!"*;

Mum: (re-framing) *"You're really upset because you really want those blocks."*

Bella: *"Yes!"*

Mum: *"Finn, you didn't want to swap. You wanted to use the blocks too?"*

Finn: *"My block"*

PROBLEM SOLVE

Mum: *"Bella you want Finn to swap blocks for cars and Finn you're suggesting Bella go outside and play, hmm this is a tricky one. I reckon you kids can work it out. Are there some ideas you haven't thought of?"*

Bella: *"Let's both go jump on the tramp."*

Finn: *"Yes! Bounce high!"*

Mum: *"You kids worked together to share your ideas and listen to each other and found a solution to your problem."*

Some days for Bella and Finn, it reaches the point where there wasn't a solution – they are both upset. It's hard for child and parent, but it's understandable and they need to be allowed to be upset. We may need to stay with the very upset child to prevent them hurting others or destroying the game. In this example if Finn is ready to move on but Bella is not, Mum may keep Bella with her. Nice messages can be; *"I'll be with you while you wait Bella"*, and stay with Bella's upset. Finn may also be upset that his sister is angry with him so may need your verbal reassurance also. *"Finn you're upset that your sister is angry with you?"*



Kid's Conflicts

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CONNECT



"Looks like you have a problem. Can I help?"

PROTECT



Physically & gently intervene if necessary

LISTEN



"Ahh...you feel ... because ... & you feel?"

PROBLEM SOLVE



"That is tricky. I believe you kids can find a solution. What ideas do we have?"



Problem Solving

KIDS



What happened?



I feel ...

excited



frustrated



angry



overwhelmed



disappointed

confused



scared



lonely



What can we do that works for us all?